

With three more weeks to go, election outcome seems predictable

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When the election race started last fall with debates over the adoption of new "rules of the game" and speculations over possibilities that the election might be cancelled, many feared that the little time left before the scheduled election day would make it impossible for parties and individual candidates to launch massive victorious campaigns. Now, with the election day only three weeks ahead, both participants and observers of the race feel exhausted and bored with trying - or watching others try - to convince every eligible voter that they (and their party or bloc) are the only ones who know the panacea for Ukraine's every illness.

Notwithstanding the differences in approach, message and the amount of available campaign funds, many of parliamentary hopefuls run a similar risk of alienating voters by claiming they "know what to do" but giving no explanation as to what prevented them from using that knowledge before. According to chairman of the Central Election Commission Mykhailo Ryabets, currently 6,449 registered candidates, including 4,231 pretenders in the single-mandate constituency, 2,379 candidates from political parties and over 300 present-day MPs, compete for 450 seats in the country's top legislative body.

The interest to the election process was also sustained by waiting for the verdict of the Constitutional Court about the legitimacy of the March election and compliance of the Election Law with the constitution. On February 27, the Constitutional Court voted unanimously to recognize several important provisions of the Election Law as unconstitutional. Specifically, it gave the citizens the possibility to protect their election rights in court by complaining about actions (or inaction) of election commissions. Similarly, the Constitutional Court ruled it would be illegal to add up potential votes of electors who did not come to polling stations to those who voted; it gave the right to vote to about 300,000 convicted criminals, stripped parliamentary candidates from immunity to administrative and criminal prosecution, and left the issue of establishing the 4% "pass" barrier within the competence of the parliament. Although the Constitutional Court prohibited running both in a majoritarian constituency and as a member of a party list, the prohibition will come into force only during the next election campaign. The same delay applies to the demand for candidates to suspend professional duties for the campaign period. The provision of the right to vote to inmates of penitentiary establishments, as well as the permission to organize polling stations on the territories of some remote military units, is viewed by some observers as a possibility of manipulation of voters and forgery of election results in favor of "the party of power".

Meanwhile, except Communists and Rukh, who have their voters, committed to the idea rather than the leaders, Petro Symonenko of the former or Vyacheslav Chornovil of the latter, few parties and blocs may be absolutely confident of overcoming the 4% barrier. According to the public opinion poll conducted by the Socis-Gallup among urban residents, 12.9% of the respondents were prepared to support the Communists, 5.7% would vote for the Rukh, 5% would support the Green party. 3.4% said they intended to vote for the Social Democratic party (United), 3% for Hromada, 2.8% for the Socialist-Peasant bloc, 2.3% for Progressive Socialists, 2.2% for the Democratic party's NEP, 2.1% for the People's Democratic party, 1.7% would support the Agrarians, and the same percentage would vote for the Reforms and Order. 8.5% of the respondents said they would not vote for any party.

Aware of the severe competition for voters' attention and seeking to appeal to the broadest possible groups of population, parties, blocs and individual candidates adjust their agendas and pre-election pledges to respond to the needs of practically any kind of voter. Socialists and Peasants, led by Speaker Oleksandr Moroz, are rapidly decorating their left-wing rhetoric with liberal slogans, the extreme right Ukrainian National Assembly announces its preference for moderate centrism, and the Pavlo Lazarenko's Hromada, arguing that "the people is not prepared to accept liberalism", has noticeably shifted to the left. Most remarkably, leader of the Ukrainian Republican party Bohdan Yaroshynsky announced his departure from the conservative position, taken by his party within the National Front bloc, and picked up a social democratic tone instead. Having failed to win sufficient support among the "nationally conscious" voters of Western Ukraine in the previous elections, Volodymyr Yavorivsky's Democratic party secured a solid economic backing and moved eastwards "to take votes directly from

Communists". Though, like most of the parties established shortly before the elections and recognized by voters only by names of their leaders, it has little chance to perform well.

The background of election battles displays facts of biased attitude of local power-holders and the media they control to selected candidates and parties. For instance, leader of the Social Democratic Party (United) Vasyl Onopenko insisted candidates from his party had repeatedly experienced pressure from local authorities. In Poltava, known for strong Socialist preferences of its officials, the city election commission denied registration to 33 candidates of the SDPU, claiming they had not been nominated properly. Although the party had stricken a "gentlemen's deal" with a number of democratic centrist forces, said Onopenko, the pre-election rivalry may heat political passions, particularly in Odesa, the Crimea and the Donetsk region, where a major of a mining town, a SDPU sympathizer, had been killed lately.

Obviously, little use has been made of the experience of the 1994 parliamentary elections, when national democratic forces lost to left-wingers primarily due to the failure to agree on nominating candidates for individual constituencies. Although the Party of Reforms and Order, led by ex-vice prime minister Victor Pynzenyk and his young reform-oriented supporters, members of the parliament Serhiy Terekhin and Serhiy Sobolev, called on "all pro-reform forces" to consolidate their efforts and not to compete with each other in majoritarian constituencies, no leaders of the centrist parties supported the initiative.

Although candidates of the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh - like their Communist rivals - do have their steady supporters and will certainly overcome the "pass" barrier, they may face severe competition from ideologically similar political forces and opponents in majoritarian constituencies. For instance, Rukh leader Vyacheslav Chornovil runs for a seat in the same majoritarian constituency as leader of the Republican party Bohdan Yaroshynsky, leader of the Ukrainian national Assembly Yuri Tyma, leaders of regional Christian Democratic and Democratic party's organizations and a few influential businessmen. Since there will be only one round of elections, it is likely that the votes will be dispersed among candidates representing similar platforms, thus, giving additional chances to candidates with original agendas - or sufficient election funds to bribe voters with free concerts, presents and alike.

To date, regional preferences for particular political parties have started to show. Voters in the Sumy region (northeastern Ukraine) - substantially influenced by chairmen of local collective farms and apparatchiks during the previous elections - now tend to support left-wingers. Local Communist and Socialist organizations, though not very numerous (3,000 and 500 members, respectively) consist of very active cores of former minor apparatchiks, experienced party organizers and retired officers. While Communists target older voters, Socialists strive to attract students and young people: 65% of the Sumy organization of the Socialist party are under 25. Facing the left-wing challenge, national democrats, right-wingers and centrists - from pro-Kuchma PDP and Agrarians to the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists - showed readiness to join ranks in an "Elections '98" association, established to coordinate activities of parties and support "agreed" candidates. All in all- 17 parties and blocs, including the PDP, the Liberals, the Party of Labor, the Agrarians, the SDPU, Rukh, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Christian Democrats, agreed to cooperate, though it is obvious that six available constituencies are not enough for election ambitions of three times as many political parties.

In Lviv, local organizations of the People's Democratic Party and the Rukh, notwithstanding the latter's repeated statements of its "opposition to the regime", held a joint conference to coordinate nominations in all 90 constituencies of Lviv, which the parties shared equally - 45 to 45. According to leaders of the two local organizations, there are "no ideological contradictions" between their entities, now united into the "Our City" election bloc.

In Kirovograd, the regional organization of the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (United) has gained strong positions in the area by means of launching a massive advertising campaign well in advance of the official election race, supported by giving free lunches and organizing entertainment events. It's main competitor in the region, Hromada, though practically banned from the national media and harassed by the top-ranking authorities, is likely to enjoy substantial support in the Kirovohrad region, as well as anywhere else in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Traditionally strong Communists and the Rukh may lose a number of votes in majoritarian constituencies to rich candidates from the emerging big business community who, like Yulia Tymoshenko of Hromada, have enough money to do

something tangible for their constituencies. To cope with the situation, regional organizations of the Communist party and the Socialist party managed to avoid the common mistake made by all political forces during the previous elections, and agreed to divide constituency in order not to distract voters from each other. The Socialists are doing especially well in the Kirovohrad region after the recent visit of Oleksandr Moroz, who skillfully played on popular dissatisfaction with the deteriorating standards of living and the power-holders' inability to make the difference. The Socialists' success has a positive impact on the rating of the Peasants' party, previously hardly visible on the regional political horizon.

Contrary to expectations, the Liberal-Labor bloc, seen as the major regional political force, is not performing well enough in the Donetsk region, giving up to Hromada, the Communists, the Socialists-Peasants and even the new Party of Regional Renaissance of Ukraine, led by Donetsk mayor Rybak and former leader of the Civic Congress of Ukraine Boldyrev. In addition, 413 individual candidates, from 13 to 23 persons in each of the constituencies, compete for the seats in 23 majoritarian constituencies. Most of the current MPs from the region are hoping to win seats again, as well as four out of eight deputy chairmen of the regional state administration, three ex-chairmen of the Donetsk city executive committee, the mayor, ex-governor Volodymyr Shcherban and independent miners' trade union leader Mykhailo Krylov. The candidates - mostly engineers and lawyers - include two former ministers of the mining industry, four Presbyterian pastors, three psychiatrists, a dozen of jobless, a missionary and a Miss Donbas.

By the end of February, 43.8% of Ukrainian voters say they will definitely take part in the election, and 9.8% say they decided not to vote. To a large extent, the outcome of the election will depend on those who have not made their choice yet (17.4%) and those who will "most likely" come to the polling stations (20%), leaving still a number of votes to be won - or lost.